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ABSTRACT

An increase in gang violence and mobility in the last 20 years has alarmed members of the public school community. Gang membership, formation, location, and growth are described. Strategies to counteract gang activity, such as school discipline policies, school and community prevention programs, information sharing networks, and state legislation, are discussed. (9 references) (LMI)

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GANGS

By Joan Gaustad

Although youth gangs have existed in the cities of the United States almost as long as the nation itself, trends during the last two decades have alarmed school and community officials. Gangs, now more violent than ever, are spreading to new locations. Warns Clarence Terhune, director of the California Youth Authority, "the problem can erupt anywhere at almost any time" (Kay McKinney 1988).

What Is a Gang?

Gangs vary tremendously in composition and activities. Irving Spergel (1989) suggests the following working definition: "juvenile and young adults associating together for serious, especially violent, criminal behavior with special concerns for 'turf'." Turf can signify the control of a physical territory, a criminal enterprise, or both.

Defense of turf can lead to extreme violence. As Captain Raymond Gott of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Office says, simply "wearing the wrong color in a certain neighborhood can get you killed" (McKinney). Turf lines are normally drawn in the neighborhoods, but gang rivalries also have a devastating impact on schools. Often, even non-gang members begin bringing weapons to school for "protection" from robberies and gang violence (Cindy Tursman 1989).

Asian, black, Hispanic, white and interracial gangs exist, ranging in size from a few members to thousands. Ages range from preteen to adult, but the average age is dropping—from 15 in 1984, to 13 1/2 in 1987 (McKinney). The vast majority of gang members are male (Spergel).

Most gang members advertise their membership by distinctive dress and behaviors, including handkerchiefs and shoelaces of specific colors, jewelry, tattoos, jargon, and hand gestures. They mark their territory and challenge other gangs with spray-painted graffiti or gang symbols. The National School Safety Center (NSSC 1988) provides an excellent summary of the characteristics of different types of gangs.

Why Do Gangs Form?

According to Larry Rawles, deputy director of Philadelphia's Crisis Intervention Network, gang membership offers kids status, acceptance, and self-esteem they haven't found elsewhere (Del Stover 1986). In poorer communities, a breakdown of family and community structures may leave kids more receptive to gang recruitment. However, gangs can also form in affluent areas among kids who feel alienated from friends and families (Stover).

Financial gain is a powerful motive for gang involvement, especially for impoverished youths with poor education and lack of access to decent jobs (McKinney). The vast sums of money available through the drug trade have increased the size of gangs, both by recruitment and by longer retention of members. Usually only a few adult gang members make large sums of money. Aware that courts treat juveniles far more leniently than adults, they shield themselves by using juvenile gang members as everything from lookouts to gang hitmen (NSSC). Drug trafficking makes traditional turf battles bloodier by providing the money for sophisticated weaponry, and it creates new sources of conflict as rival gangs fight over lucrative drug territories (McKinney).

Where Are Gangs a Problem and How Do They Spread?

Gangs continue to be active in large cities where they have been long established, and they are spreading to suburbs and smaller cities. Pressure by police and rivals and the lure of higher drug profits push gangs to seek new territories (Dan Bryant 1989). Meanwhile, in many midsize communities factory closings and business failures create unemployment and poverty, "conditions conducive to gang activity" (Tursman).

In some cities, like Chicago and Philadelphia, gang activity is actually stabilizing or declining as their gangs move into other cities like Detroit and Milwaukee (Tursman). Gangs flourish in Los Angeles, the current "gang capital of the U.S.," in spite of increased community and police efforts, and have spread like cancer to surrounding communities (Stover). The Drug Enforcement Agency has confirmed the presence of members of Los Angeles gangs in forty-nine other cities across the nation. Chris Baca, director of Albuquerque's Youth Development, Inc., warns other midsize cities to react quickly; by the time Albuquerque acknowledged it had a problem, gangs with Los Angeles origins were firmly established (McKinney).

School officials in Eugene, Oregon, aware of the dramatic increase in gang activity in nearby Portland, recently made a unique attempt to block its spread to their own community. On October 2, 1989, eighteen-year-old Robbie Robinson, accompanied by two friends wearing gang colors, enrolled at South Eugene High School. Administrators contacted Jefferson High School in Portland, Robinson's previous high school, and learned he had an extensive record of gang activity and had been barred from finishing high school there. On Robinson's first day of attendance, a group of seven additional teens dressed in gang fashion entered and walked through the halls. One of them announced that he, too, planned to enroll.

Principal Don Jackson suspended Robinson. A week later, in the first such action in the nation, the school board sought an injuction in Lane County Circuit Court to bar the student permanently from the city's schools, not on the basis of any specific actions, but because "his mere presence at the school in clothing associated with gang membership constitutes a danger to the health and safety of students" (Jeff Wright 1989). On November 8, the injunction was granted.

Some citizens expressed concern about the constitutionality of the ruling, but members of the local chapter of the NAACP and of the Community Coalition for the Prevention of Gangs applauded the action. Said Jackson, "You don't un-gang a community. We may not be able to keep it out, but at least we have to try" (personal interview, May 7, 1990).

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How Can School Officials Fight Gang Activity?

Experts agree the schools must be established as neutral ground. Anything related to gang membership should be banned: weapons, violence, illegal activity, gang-identified clothing, insignia, and gestures. Staff can expect to be tested constantly by the subtle and changing forms of gang symbols.

Administrators must communicate clear, consistent standards of discipline and enforce them. In a study of Ohio gang activity, Dr. Ronald Huff found that teachers who backed down in confrontations were more likely to be assaulted than teachers who were fair but firm (Bryant). The NSSC details a number of specific conflict prevention strategies.

Graffiti should be painted over immediately. Not only does this signal that school property is not the gang's, it also discourages rival gangs from responding with more graffiti, or worse, defacing their rival's symbols, which can lead to retaliation and violence.

Anti-gang policies of the Portland school superintendent included searching students and lockers if there were indications of drugs or weapons, and expelling and referring to juvenile court any student found to possess weapons (McKinney).

Some districts split up gangs by transferring disruptive students. This may reduce friction, but Spergel warns new problems sometimes result; a gang member may be picked out if he is transferred to a school dominated by another gang (Stover). Schools may also offer alternative educational programs for gang members (Richard Arthur 1989).

Districts unused to gang activity may be reluctant to acknowledge its appearance. Roberto Rivera, director of the Chicago Intervention Network, urges school boards to encourage administrators to be alert for signs of gang activity and assure them that reporting problems won't reflect adversely on them (Stover).

Preventive efforts are also important. Chicago schools offer recreational alternatives to gang activity by staying open for evening extracurricular activities (Stover). The City of Paramount, California, has developed an anti-gang curriculum entitled "Alternatives to Gang Membership" (Tursman). Experts stress the importance of starting prevention programs in the early elementary grades in order to circumvent gang influence (Bryant). Spergel suggests specifically targeting "youth who give clear indication of gang involvement" as opposed to those identified as generally "at-risk." Some warning signs include evidence of child abuse, behavior and personality changes, gang-identified dress, sudden unexplained wealth, and increased substance abuse (NSSC).

How Can Schools and Communities Jointly Fight Gangs?

Information sharing is vital. Milwaukee School Security chief Jerry Mourning urges schools to keep abreast of gang rivalries: "You need to know what's happening in the community. What happens over the weekend, we handle on Monday mornings" (Stover). In Chicago, the school board receives monthly reports on student assaults from each school to give them an overview of citywide trends (Stover).

Police expertise can benefit schools. In Chicago, police have trained 6,000 teachers to identify gang behaviors. Milwaukee school administrators and police meet periodically to exchange information on gang activities. Police can also train school staff to handle armed or violent youths (Stover).

In many communities, schools have joined law enforcement, judicial, and civil authorities to create coordinated anti-gang programs, such as the Philadelphia Crisis Intervention Network and the Chicago Intervention Network. School boards in Pasadena and Compton, California, have invited the Los Angeles Community Youth Gang Services "to conduct weekly seminars for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders on the dangers of becoming involved with a street gang" (Stover). The NSSC lists a number of successful school and community programs, some preventive in nature.

Sometimes anti-gang efforts go beyond the community. In 1985, Illinois passed legislation increasing penalties for distribution or sale of weapons and drugs within 1,000 feet of school property. New Jersey recently established similar safe-school zones (Tursman). Even comprehensive efforts may be unable to eliminate gangs. But school officials can take steps to control gang activity within their sphere, and they can make valuable contributions to reducing the problem in their communities.

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